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# Workers, Unions, and Historians on the Northern Plains

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# WORKERS, UNIONS, AND HISTORIANS ON THE NORTHERN PLAINS

WILLIAM C. PRATT

Labor history has come of age over the past three decades. Today two national journals, *Labor History* and *Labor's Heritage*, focus on this subject in the United States, and many others, including the *Journal of American History*, publish articles in the field. In fact, much of what is called new social history often treats labor history topics, and many western historians have had an extended interest in labor history. Numerous recent examples, including the work of Carlos Schwantes, Michael Kazin, Vicki Ruiz, and others have been well received.<sup>1</sup>

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But labor history on the northern Plains is a different matter. The basic state histories by Elwyn B. Robinson (North Dakota), Herbert Schell (South Dakota) and James C. Olson (Nebraska) refer to a few labor topics in passing, and none of them mention any unions by name other than the Knights of Labor or the Industrial Workers of the World (IWW).<sup>2</sup> While these works were conceptualized over a generation ago, more recent interpretive essays on northern Plains states reflect a similar neglect of the topic.<sup>3</sup>

Relatively few people have researched labor history in this region, and most historians have not paid it any attention. Yet by the 1990s there is a body of scholarship in print that treats facets of the history of organized labor in the Dakotas and Nebraska. This work includes articles on the use of the militia in late nineteenth century Omaha labor disputes, the IWW in North Dakota and Nebraska, Teamster organizing efforts in the Dakotas, and packinghouse strikes in Omaha and Sioux Falls.<sup>4</sup> In addition, some graduate theses and dissertations have addressed labor topics, and a few popular accounts on labor union history have been produced.<sup>5</sup> But when compared with



FIG. 1. Railroad strikers in McCook, Nebraska in 1922. Photograph by Ellingson Studio, McCook, Nebraska. Courtesy of Linda Hein, McCook, Nebraska.

the Southwest or the Pacific Northwest, the northern Plains has lagged behind in the study of labor history, and a great deal of work remains to be done.<sup>6</sup> Perhaps it is time to make an assessment of the research that has been completed and, more important, to suggest possible areas for new research. My focus is upon labor unions and labor-management relations, and this essay examines topics related to those approaches that could be pursued in the future. But I stress at the outset that it is not presented as a comprehensive survey of labor history topics that need to be studied and that other subjects and approaches should be explored as well.<sup>7</sup>

#### RAILROAD WORKERS

Railroad workers in this region have attracted very little attention to date. Shelton Stromquist's *A Generation of Boomers* is a possible model that others could use in the study of nineteenth and twentieth century railroad unionization efforts.<sup>8</sup> Both Nebraska and North Dakota had transcontinental railroads, and explorations into episodes such as the

Upheavals of 1877 and 1886, the Pullman Strike, and the 1922 Shopmen's Strike seem appropriate. It is worth noting, however, that national and regional patterns often have local variations or exceptions. Union Pacific railroad workers in Omaha were able to avoid a wage cut in 1877 and thus did not go out on strike.<sup>9</sup> The 1894 Pullman strike skipped this city as well.

North Platte, Nebraska, has been a railroad center for more than a century, but to the best of my knowledge, its railroad labor history has never been studied. The following passage from the WPA guidebook for Nebraska suggests some possibilities:

A year-long strike occurred in 1902-1903 when Union Pacific machinists and boiler-makers struck in opposition to the piecework system. Local sympathy was with the strikers, and merchants would not sell to strike-breakers, barbers would not shave them, landlords refused to rent to them. Gradually, however, they were accepted by the town and the strike was thought lost. However, a settlement was finally reached,

the piecework system was abolished, and strikers returned to work with a cent and a half hourly increase in pay.<sup>10</sup>

This episode sounds very much like some nineteenth century strikes treated by Herbert Gutman, who found community backing for local workers against outside employers.<sup>11</sup> I suspect that this theme can often be explored in labor conflicts on the northern Plains.

So far the only attempt to examine northern Plains railroad strife in depth is a 1994 *Nebraska History* article by Thomas Magnuson that treats the 1922 Shopmen's Strike in two Nebraska communities, Havelock and Plattsmouth. While Havelock strikers and the community itself, including local officials, were militant and uncompromising, their counterparts in Plattsmouth were more accommodating. In some respects, these differences mirrored what Stromquist had found in Creston and Burlington, Iowa, in earlier railroad struggles.<sup>12</sup>

#### KNIGHTS OF LABOR

Many railroad workers in the late nineteenth century had been members of the Knights of Labor at one time or another. While the explorations of the Knights in this region are in the rudimentary stages, a number of the assemblies were made up of railroaders. Erling N. Sannes, who has studied the Knights in the Dakotas, concludes that they played a major role in reform politics and were the most important labor organization in South Dakota until the union drives of the 1930s.<sup>13</sup>

Jonathan Garlock's dissertation on the Knights of Labor provides us with a baseline for this region. While there were 29 assemblies in the Dakotas, Nebraska had 150. Twenty-eight of these were organized in Omaha or South Omaha, then a separate town, leaving approximately 120 across the rest of the state. A number of them were in railroad towns, including Wymore, McCook, and North Platte.<sup>14</sup>

The Knights probably assumed more importance in Omaha than elsewhere in the region. While they had quite a few mixed assemblies, one of the most important was made up exclusively of Union Pacific employees. Omaha's first "labor day" celebration, held on 4 July 1887, was organized by the Knights. At the time, the Knights were affiliated with the city's central labor body and may have had a larger following than AFL unions. A number of individuals who later acquired prominence in the local trade union movement had prior involvement in the Knights.<sup>15</sup>

Some of the Knights took part in third party efforts before the Populist revolt of the 1890s, but not all of their adherents were willing to break with the Republican party. Among South Dakota Knights, for example, a number refused to leave the GOP, fearing that the bolt would jeopardize the labor movement.<sup>16</sup> Third party politics has often presented a dilemma for union activists, and that persistent dilemma helps account for the ultimate demise of a number of political insurgencies.

More research, particularly on the Nebraska Knights, is warranted. Leon Fink's *Workingmen's Democracy* and Ralph Scharnau's work on Iowa offer good models for what might be undertaken here.<sup>17</sup> While I doubt that such efforts will uncover as rich a lore as these authors discovered in Kansas City, Kansas, or Dubuque, Iowa, similar explorations will add greatly to our understanding of the Knights on the northern Plains.

#### PACKINGHOUSE WORKERS

Another regional topic that demands more attention is that of packinghouse workers. South Omaha quickly emerged as the third largest packing center in the nation, but workers in a number of other communities, including Nebraska City, Fremont, Sioux Falls, and Fargo, worked in packing by 1920. In more recent years, plants in the older packing centers closed, not being able to compete with the new firms of Iowa Beef Processors (IBP) and Monfort, which operate modern facilities





FIG. 2. *Striking Omaha Packinghouse Workers in 1948.* Courtesy of Frances Winters, Omaha, Nebraska.

in Dakota City, Grand Island, and now Lexington, Nebraska.

Numerous attempts to organize packinghouse workers date to the nineteenth century. In Omaha and other packing centers, a basic pattern emerged. Workers would unionize, take part in a national strike, and then have their union ousted from the plant for a number of years. Strikes in 1894, 1904, and 1921-22 all ended in the elimination of the union and the imposition of the open shop. Not until the CIO's Packinghouse Workers Organizing Committee (PWOC) of the late 1930s and early 1940s did Omaha packinghouse workers reorganize and their unions bargain collectively with their employers.<sup>18</sup> Union contracts governed until the late 1960s and early 1970s, when the big plants closed, but a sizeable number of local workers were covered by collective bargaining agreements well into the 1980s. In 1982-83, the city witnessed what may have

been its last packinghouse strike, when Local 60 lost a bitter strike against Cudahy and the union was decertified. Today, there are no unionized packinghouse workers in Omaha.<sup>19</sup>

But the story of packinghouse workers on the Northern Plains is not simply a variation of the Omaha story. In Sioux Falls and a number of other communities, packinghouse workers were organized much later, did not participate in as many national strikes, and did not join the PWOC or the United Packinghouse Workers of America (UPWA), which emerged out of the PWOC during World War II. Sioux Falls workers, though many of them belonged to the Amalgamated Meat Cutters, did not go on strike in 1921-22. When they reorganized in the mid-1930s, they again affiliated with the Amalgamated.<sup>20</sup> In 1948, when the UPWA went out on strike, Sioux Falls workers, like their counterparts in Grand Forks, continued working. They accepted the



FIG. 3. *North Dakota Socialist Party Convention, Minot, 1910.* Courtesy of Institute for Regional Studies, North Dakota State University, Fargo. #C1833.

nine-cent an hour raise that the CIO union was forced to take at the end of a ten week walkout and, more importantly, did not miss a paycheck.

In the mid-1940s, South Dakota had approximately 3000 unionized packinghouse workers, many fewer than neighboring Nebraska.<sup>21</sup> That they stayed with the AFL union helps explain why the CIO did not have a strong presence in the state.

The packing industry is much less organized now than it was two decades ago, and the main union in packing, the United Food and Commercial Workers (UFCW), has been less effective than its predecessors. Most of the IBP facilities are not unionized. The workforce of IBP's flagship plant, in Dakota City, Nebraska, is organized, however, and each time the contract expired, until 1991, there was either a lockout or a strike, often with violent confrontations. The state patrol and national

guard were called out in 1968-69, 1977, and 1982.<sup>22</sup> Labor-management relations at IBP seemed like a throwback to an earlier era in the industry's history. In 1994, after years of trying, the UFCW won a close representation election at Monfort's Grand Island plant, and it is now attempting to organize the IBP operation in Lexington.<sup>23</sup>

More research on packinghouse workers in the region is warranted. Most of the attention of scholars who treat this topic focuses upon major packing centers, particularly Chicago, and the CIO era. A great deal more work, however, remains to be done on the smaller centers and on the periods before and after the heyday of the CIO.<sup>24</sup>

#### MINERS

Western historians have toiled extensively in the field of mining history, particularly when



FIG. 4. Fifteen hundred hands on one freight train going through Mitchell, South Dakota, July 1916. Photographed by L. E. Stair, Mitchell, South Dakota. Courtesy of the Center for Western Studies, Augustana College.

it has involved class warfare in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Historically, thousands of miners have worked in North and South Dakota mines. The Homestake gold mine in the Black Hills is the best known, but there were a number of independently operated facilities nearby. In North Dakota there are substantial deposits of lignite coal in the central and northwestern part of the state. At one time, the Western Federation of Miners represented Homestake miners. In 1909-10, however, the company locked its workers out and broke the union.<sup>25</sup> It was a bitter struggle, and the labor movement never was reconciled to this defeat. Repeated efforts have been undertaken to unionize the workers. During World War II, an attempt was made to organize them into an AFL federal union.

Later, the United Mine Workers District 50 conducted a campaign, as did the United Steel Workers and the Operating Engineers. Finally, in 1966, the Steel Workers successfully organized Homestake and continue to represent its workforce to this day.<sup>26</sup>

#### LABOR RADICALISM

Some labor historians seemingly are not interested in unionized workers unless they were involved with some variety of radicalism. While the current image of the northern Plains is clearly conservative, this region had its left-wing unionists in the past. The central labor bodies of both South Omaha and Omaha were controlled by Socialists for a brief time in the early part of the twentieth century; the





FIG. 5. Part of the "great fear," harvest hands held up and searched for weapons, Mitchell, South Dakota, 30 July 1916. Photographed by L. E. Stair, Mitchell, South Dakota. Courtesy of the Center for Western Studies, Augustana College.

IWW had a following in all three states; Lawrence County, South Dakota, the site of the Homestake, provided the Socialist Party with its strongest vote prior to the 1910 defeat; Communists helped organize Omaha packinghouse workers in the 1930s; and a North Dakota AFL leader was a long-time member of the Communist Party (CP).<sup>27</sup> (See Fig. 3)

Farmer-Labor efforts were in vogue on the northern Plains in the World War I era and the 1920s. The Nonpartisan League (NPL) was a key element in this insurgency. Although the NPL was an agrarian movement, it sought a coalition with organized labor. It was most successful in North Dakota, where the NPL originated. In this state, it endorsed the AFL's platform as part of its own and worked to imple-

ment such measures into law.<sup>28</sup> There, one of the most interesting experiments in American radicalism ultimately failed. In 1917, the NPL attempted to work out a closed shop agreement with the IWW. Under the terms of the proposal, NPL members agreed to hire only IWW card holders as harvest workers. In return, IWW members would work only for NPLers. Although the agreement was negotiated, dissatisfaction within League ranks scuttled the idea.<sup>29</sup> Considering the "great fear" (See Figs. 4, 5, 6, 7) in the countryside about the Wobblies, it is noteworthy that this scheme got as far as it did.

We have solid studies on the IWW in the region, but much more could be done. As is the case with the Knights of Labor or the building trades, detailed local investigations on the



FIG. 6. Harvest hands marched to north bound freight train after being searched for weapons, Mitchell, South Dakota, 30 July 1916. Photographed by L. E. Stair, Mitchell, South Dakota. Courtesy of the Center for Western Studies, Augustana College.

Wobblies and the community's response to them would be informative. I also wonder what the possibilities might be for tracing the later careers of former IWW members in the region. Some sons of farmers became harvest hands and joined the "one big union." A former South Dakota Communist leader told me that two of his brothers, who were raised on a farm near Bristol, South Dakota, were IWW members prior to enlisting in the CP in the 1930s.<sup>30</sup>

The Communist following among urban workers on the northern Plains was not large. Some packinghouse workers in Omaha, a few railroad workers in Mitchell and Aberdeen, South Dakota, and a couple of building trades unionists in Bismarck were what it amounted to in the post-World War II era.<sup>31</sup> Earlier, however, there had been more. The unemployed, or some of them, had been enlisted into the

Unemployed Council in Omaha, Williston, North Dakota, and Roberts County, South Dakota; later, relief workers joined the Workers Alliance in Omaha, North Platte, Williston, and Aberdeen.<sup>32</sup>

But little attention has been paid to such organizational efforts. The WPA guidebook for Nebraska shows a photograph of a Workers Alliance meeting, presumably in North Platte.<sup>33</sup> Didn't that picture ever encourage someone to investigate what the Workers Alliance was, or what it was doing in North Platte?

Compared with Minnesota and Montana, union radicalism on the northern Plains was not a major topic. In the Dakotas farmers were more likely to be Communists than were workers, and by 1950 there were not many CP members anywhere in the region.<sup>34</sup> But it is a



FIG. 7. Harvest hands leaving Mitchell on a north bound freight, Mitchell, South Dakota, July 1916. Photographed by L. E. Stair, Mitchell, South Dakota. Courtesy of the Center for Western Studies, Augustana College.

question worth posing: What was the significance of the earlier left-wing experience that many unionists either passed through or witnessed?

#### TEAMSTERS

The Teamsters have been one of the major unions in the region since the late 1930s. Although there were efforts earlier, the drivers met with their greatest organizing successes in the 1930s and 1940s. Erling Sannes has written several specialized studies on these efforts in the Dakotas, western Minnesota, and Iowa City.<sup>35</sup> Although related to Teamster initiatives in the Twin Cities, these local campaigns have a history of their own. Omaha proved to be a key to firming up the central states' 1938 over-the-road contract, as it took a twenty-

two-week stoppage in early 1939 to bring that city's major trucking firms to the bargaining table, where they accepted a closed shop agreement.<sup>36</sup> But Teamster history does not end with the 1939 contract. A great deal of additional digging is in order to trace the history of what remains one of the single largest unions in each of the northern Plains states.<sup>37</sup>

#### EMPLOYER OFFENSIVES

Periodically, employers in this region launched campaigns against organized labor, and such attempts should be thoroughly researched. While we do not yet know the extent of this anti-union movement, both Omaha and Fargo had employer groups that thwarted union efforts for years. The Omaha Business Men's Association was organized in the spring



FIG. 8. *Omaha Teamsters celebrating after winning a long strike in 1939.* From the John Savage Collection owned by Western Heritage Museum.

of 1903 and orchestrated local employer responses to union demands that year and later. After a 1903 lock-out, many local businesses opted for the open shop. A 1909 union defeat on the street railway reinforced employer opposition to unions.<sup>38</sup> But not until the World War I era did the local labor movement again seize the initiative, only to suffer a series of postwar defeats that reestablished the open shop at most work sites. By the 1930s the Business Men's Association asserted: "Omaha is the best open shop city of its size in the United States." Omaha employers remained in the driver's seat well into the Depression decade. Unionization drives and New Deal policies, however, led to major changes in local labor-management relations. Among the biggest changes were those in the trucking and pack-

ing industries, where the Teamsters and the CIO's PWOC made major gains by the outbreak of World War II.<sup>39</sup>

Fargo employers took the offensive in 1913, announcing that henceforth an open shop policy would be in effect. Union countermeasures proved ineffective and Fargo remained an open shop town until the 1934 milk drivers strike.<sup>40</sup> Unfortunately, we do not know as much about the makeup of the Fargo employer group as we do of the Omaha Business Men's Association. Further research on this topic is warranted in this North Dakota city and a number of others in the region.

Much of the historical scholarship on the anti-union movement in the United States has focused upon the pre-1940 era. But important initiatives against organized labor,



some of which were quite successful, date to the World War II years. These efforts at the state level across the country loom in the background of the anti-labor legislation, including the Taft-Hartley Law, of the late 1940s. Labor historians have focused a disproportionate amount of attention to labor-management relations at the national level and in major industries such as steel and automobiles. State legislation also is important, and what one contemporary observer labelled "a war against unions" has been neglected.<sup>41</sup>

In 1943 a variety of anti-labor bills were introduced in state legislatures, including those of Nebraska and South Dakota. While the Nebraska labor movement was successful in stopping these measures in committee, its counterpart in South Dakota was less fortunate, as the legislature passed a bill banning any kind of picketing in disputes involving farm labor. Later, the ominous features of the measure were ruled unconstitutional, and the state did not appeal the decision.<sup>42</sup>

Though anti-union bills were introduced across the nation, particular groups promoted them in the individual states. The Farm Bureau was a strong proponent, and employer groups emerged as key sponsors. In South Dakota, the Homestake Mine routinely backed efforts to limit unions. During World War II, the AFL undertook an organizing campaign throughout the Black Hills, and other employers banded together to resist the drive. Then and later the Homestake Mine was seen as an enthusiastic backer of anti-labor legislation.<sup>43</sup>

In Nebraska the Farm Bureau proved a staunch backer of anti-labor measures, but not until the postwar era did employers launch a strong anti-union drive. While the Omaha Business Men's Association continued in existence, local employers opted to form a new group. Soon after the Nebraska Small Business Men's Association (NSBMA) appeared in the spring of 1946, it announced an initiative campaign to make Nebraska a right-to-work state. The state legislature did not meet in 1946, so the strategy was to amend the

Nebraska constitution through a referendum vote, which carried by a three to two margin.<sup>44</sup>

South Dakota also became a right-to-work state by referendum in 1946. There, however, a 1945 bill provided for a state-wide vote on the measure. South Dakota voters opted for the ban on the union shop, 93,035 to 39,257.<sup>45</sup>

North Dakota soon joined the right-to-work camp as well. A newly formed organization, the Associated Industries of North Dakota, sponsored a right-to-work bill and another anti-union measure in 1947. Despite opposition from the Farmers Union and the labor movement, the restrictive labor legislation passed and was signed into law. The labor movement quickly organized a petition drive to refer the measures to the voters, and the anti-union laws were suspended until the 1948 primary election. But when North Dakota voters had a chance, they followed the example of their counterparts to the south, approving the laws and putting their state in the right-to-work column in 1948.<sup>46</sup>

The political lineup in the three states had been somewhat different. In Nebraska, the Farmers Union joined the Farm Bureau and Grange in support of the right-to-work measure in 1947. There, the Farmers Union was out of step with its national leadership and its Dakota counterparts.<sup>47</sup> Other Nebraska differences relate to the relative strength of both the Democratic party and the CIO. Although Nebraska was a Republican state like the Dakotas, its Democratic ranks were more numerous and officially opposed the right-to-work amendment. The CIO, with 8000 packing-house unionists in Omaha, was a much stronger force in Nebraska than in either of the Dakotas, but actually, the right-to-work forces had an easy time of it in all three of the northern Plains states. Unionists in the region continue to attribute many of their troubles to the right-to-work status of their respective states. It may be, however, that the unions lost their fight in 1946-48 because of the relative weakness of organized labor, not that the right-to-work laws explain the unions' subsequent difficulties.<sup>48</sup>

## WOMEN AND PEOPLE OF COLOR

Some of the most important research in labor history today deals with women and people of color, so it may seem surprising that there is virtually no scholarly publication on this subject in northern Plains states outside Omaha. Perhaps part of the explanation is that aside from Omaha, African-Americans make up a very small percentage of the population. More significant is the overall lack of attention to urban and industrial working people in the region's historiography.

Omaha has had an extended labor history, and women and nonwhites have played a big part in that story. Among the city's Knights of Labor assemblies, two were exclusively female and another African-American. Some craft unions like barbers and musicians were racially segregated in this era as well.<sup>49</sup>

Blacks often first entered the story, as far as trade unionists were concerned, as strike breakers. Omaha labor history is replete with accounts of employers recruiting blacks during labor disputes. Every major packing strike from 1894 to 1948 had black strike breakers. In 1904, when packinghouse workers went out on a national strike, the South Omaha packers brought in hundreds of African-American and Japanese-American strike breakers. In 1921 packers again recruited blacks to take the places of strikers.

But it must be emphasized that blacks worked in this industry on a routine basis as well. Wartime labor shortages attracted Southern blacks to jobs in the packing plants and on the railroad, doubling Omaha's African-American population between 1910 and 1920. When the union was reestablished in South Omaha in 1917, blacks took part. A few of them assumed leadership positions and many black unionists went out on strike during the 1921-22 walkout. One of the results of the ouster of the Amalgamated from the plants was the virtual elimination of black participation in the local labor movement. Until the CIO drives of the 1930s, the only African-American unionists in Omaha were Pullman

car porters, musicians and a handful of laborers.<sup>50</sup>

Blacks again were involved in the packing-house unionizing efforts of the 1930s and 1940s. The first president of the Armour's local was black, and the chairman of the bargaining committee of that local was, for years, an African-American. Blacks assumed leadership in other packing locals as well. Local 47, which represented Swift employees, had a black president in 1948 who was later elected to the state legislature. Another African-American from this local, J. C. Harris, served as state CIO president in 1953 and 1954.<sup>51</sup>

While blacks have taken part in other unions as well, the decline of the packing industry in Omaha may have resulted in a decrease in their influence in the local labor movement. Local 60, which represented Cudahy workers, had a black president at the time it lost a strike in 1983, which led to the decertification of the union soon after. Without romanticizing the role that Omaha packinghouse unions have had in regard to black involvement, it should be noted that overall that experience was often a significant one for African-Americans.<sup>52</sup>

Women also worked in the packing industry and at times emerged into prominence. In 1917, during one of the more successful strikes in the local industry, women workers at Cudahy assumed a leading role and may have had a higher profile during this episode than any other. Four years later, during the disastrous 1921-22 strike, women again were active. This time, a substantial amount of violence accompanied the ten-week walkout, and women strikers and relatives of strikers often were arrested for assault and other strike-related violence. One of the most dramatic episodes involved a march of the "Amazon Army," made up of three hundred women related to strikers, on the Omaha city council. (Fig. 9.) The march was modeled on an episode that had just occurred in the Kansas coal field strike where women attacked strike breakers and attempted to block their entry into the mines.<sup>53</sup>



FIG. 9. Newspaper report about the "Amazon Army," three hundred Omaha women who marched on the Omaha City Hall building to protest abuses by the packers and police during the strike. The "Army" consisted mainly of relatives of strikers rather than strikers themselves. Omaha Daily News, 20 December 1921.

Women also took part in the later packing union efforts. During the late 1930s, a husband-and-wife team was quite active in the Armour's local in Omaha, and later some women served as officers of other UPWA locals.<sup>54</sup> In 1942, the union helped pressure Armour to hire black women in the plant, and efforts were made to establish equal pay for equal work. This was a difficult issue internally within the UPWA, and I do not want to suggest that it was handled to everyone's satisfaction. It was not.<sup>55</sup> Later, in the early 1970s, a woman was elected president of Local 62, the bargaining agent for Wilson employees.<sup>56</sup>

Additional research on women and minorities is in order in this region. Mexican-Americans have labored in the sugar beet and packing industry of Nebraska, and Hispanics now are employed in large numbers in IBP plants in Dakota City and Lexington and the Monfort facility in Grand Island.<sup>57</sup> While Japanese-

Americans were hired to work in Omaha packing plants and on railroad construction across North Dakota in the early twentieth century, today's Asian workers are more likely to be from Southeast Asia.<sup>58</sup> In 1986, when IBP locked out its work force over a contract dispute, both the company and the UFCW employed translators to promote their cause among the Asian workers.<sup>59</sup>

#### RECENT TRENDS

U.S. government spending, beginning in the World War II era, helped transform the labor market on the northern Plains. The ranks of organized labor grew in the war years, and the postwar employer offensive did not turn the clock back completely. Those years were also marked by large-scale construction projects, such as Air Force bases in or near Omaha, Rapid City, Grand Forks, and Minot, and Army Corps of Engineers dams. Union



FIG. 10. Drawing by Doug Knutson accompanied article by John Taylor, "Unions' Star Appears to Be in Decline," *Omaha World-Herald*, 6 September 1982. Courtesy of *The Omaha World-Herald*.

labor was utilized extensively, and the building trades especially thrived in this era. Though the anti-labor legislation stung, as a practical matter many union workers did well in the immediate post-World War years. Sometimes, such as when the Anti-Ballistic Missile System was being installed in the 1970s in North Dakota, union workers from outside the state had to be recruited. But construction projects of this type had a boom-or-bust quality to them. Once the project was complete, the need for skilled labor was greatly reduced, and unions such as the Carpenters often fell upon hard times.<sup>60</sup>

By the mid-1970s, organized labor in this region had suffered substantial setbacks. The

packing industry, which had been heavily unionized, underwent a major transformation, and plants in Omaha, Fargo, and Grand Forks closed. Newer firms such as IBP and Monfort built facilities in smaller towns and often operated them on a nonunion basis. Many unions, including the building trades, printers, and Teamsters have lost members in recent decades, as employers increasingly seek a "union-free environment."<sup>61</sup>

#### PUBLIC SECTOR BARGAINING

One major exception to this trend nationally and regionally is the growth of public sector bargaining. This story is just beginning to be told, but it is a very significant development in the history of labor-management relations in the United States.<sup>62</sup> Today, city and county workers, including police and firefighters, and school teachers are organized in all the northern Plains states; state employees and some public college and university professors are covered by collective bargaining in Nebraska; higher education faculty are unionized in South Dakota; and the state employees' union is seeking bargaining legislation in North Dakota.

State law is crucial for public sector bargaining, as city, county, and state employees are not covered by the National Labor Relations Act. Nebraska, despite its conservative reputation, seemingly has led the way on the Plains in regard to public employee bargaining. Although there had been earlier discussion on the subject, it was not until 1969 that legislation enabling state employees to bargain was adopted.<sup>63</sup> Prior to this time, there was bargaining on the part of teachers in some districts and city employees in some locales. The American Federation of State, County and Municipal Employees (AFSCME), which already represented some city and county workers in the state, vied with the Nebraska Association of Public Employees (NAPE) to win the loyalties of state employees. Each won some representation elections and bargained with the state for a number of years. In 1987,

after Nebraska law governing state bargaining had been revised, the two unions merged into NAPE-AFSCME.<sup>64</sup>

School teachers in Nebraska have been represented by the Nebraska State Education Association, an affiliate of the National Education Association (NEA), which is the largest union in the state. In addition to representing 15,000 public school teachers, it also is the bargaining agent for some state employees and the faculty at the state colleges and the University of Nebraska at Kearney. The American Association of University Professors (AAUP) represents more than four hundred faculty members at the University of Nebraska at Omaha.<sup>65</sup> Nebraska legislation prohibits strikes of public employees but provides for binding arbitration in the event of impasse in contract negotiations. This last feature stands in marked contrast to the situation in the Dakotas, where public employers can ultimately impose their final offer.<sup>66</sup> And state workers in the Dakotas, it should be remembered, still do not have the right to bargain.

The North Dakota Public Employees Association affiliated with the American Federation of Teachers (AFT) in 1988 and is actively seeking legislation that will provide collective bargaining to state workers.<sup>67</sup> In South Dakota, on the other hand, the South Dakota State Employees Organization does not consider itself a union. There, AFSCME represents some of the state highway workers and may emerge as the bargaining agent for many more state employees if bargaining rights are extended to them.<sup>68</sup> In South Dakota, despite the absence of bargaining for state workers, the faculty at public colleges and universities are organized and represented by an affiliate of the South Dakota Education Association.<sup>69</sup>

## CONCLUSION

Studying the labor history or the history of labor-management relations on the northern Plains is a bigger task than many might imagine. Properly understood, it involves much

more than a few flamboyant episodes or isolated incidents. In fact, it offers new possibilities for synthesizing the history of this region since the late nineteenth century. Prior efforts tend to stress the differences of northern Plains states from more industrialized states and often minimize the basis of comparison. Yet without denying regional distinctions (not to mention very real differences among these three states), I believe this approach suggests new ways in which comparisons can be made between developments on the northern Plains and other parts of the country.

In addition, attention to labor-management relations may also qualify older notions about the relative progressive ranking of states in this region. Historians repeatedly have declared North Dakota as the most progressive or left-of-center state on the Plains. Much of this reputation dates to the NPL experience and is persuasive for that era. Nebraska, on the other hand, usually is characterized as a much more conservative state.<sup>70</sup> Yet what happens when we consider the matter of public sector bargaining? Here, Nebraska has been in the vanguard on the Plains. I do not want to exaggerate the extent of legislative largesse on this topic, but at least as far as public employees are concerned, Nebraska law makers have been more forthcoming than their counterparts in the rest of the region.<sup>71</sup>

More attention to labor topics, particularly those associated with unions and labor-management relations, will help us better understand political and economic developments on the northern Plains. Organized labor, to be sure, was not always a major player in these episodes, but it often was a participant. For example, research on the Knights of Labor (as Erling Sannes's work suggests) will add to our knowledge of Populism in these states. Another topic that should be explored is the role that the labor movement played in making the Democratic Party into a real competitor in this region.

Today, in a section of the country that earlier was a Republican stronghold, five of the six U.S. senators are Democrats. Until 1996



Nebraska had not elected a Republican senator since 1972 and North Dakota has not since 1980. All three of these states have also elected Democratic governors in recent decades, and no Republican governor in Nebraska has been reelected in more than thirty years. In the mid-1950s, organized labor in North Dakota was a junior partner in the initiative to move the NPL from the GOP to the Democratic camp; in the early 1970s, it was a major player in the successful effort to reject a new state constitution because it contained a right-to-work measure.<sup>72</sup> The history of unions and state politics in this region is an important topic for subsequent research, and graduate students and others can find a variety of subjects related to it to occupy them for a long time.

Several years ago, Frederick C. Luebke explained Nebraska's distinctiveness in terms of "the interplay of culture with environment over time," an approach that obviously could be utilized with profit in the study of other states.<sup>73</sup> What I would suggest is that a state's labor history is another element in this interplay, and that its study will add significantly to our overall historical understanding. And, I might add, this subject matter is too important to be left only to labor historians. There are, as this essay suggests, many labor topics on the northern Plains that need to be researched. The sources are numerous, including the vast newspaper collections at state historical societies, organizational materials gathering dust in union halls and people's attics and garages, legal documents tucked away in law offices and archives, and recollections in the fleeting memories of thousands of union activists and other observers. Isn't it time that more of us took up this assignment?

#### NOTES

An earlier version of this essay was presented at the Northern Great Plains History Conference, Pierre, South Dakota, 1 October 1993.

1. Carlos Schwantes, *Radical Heritage: Labor, Socialism, and Reform in Washington and British Columbia* (Seattle: University of Washington,

1979); Vicki Ruiz, *Cannery Women, Cannery Lives: Mexican Women, Unionization, and the California Food Processing Industry, 1930-1950* (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 1987); Michael Kazin, *Barons of Labor: The San Francisco Building Trades and Union Power in the Progressive Era* (Urbana and Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 1987).

2. Elwyn B. Robinson, *History of North Dakota* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1966); Herbert S. Schell, *History of South Dakota*, 2d ed. (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1975); James C. Olson, *History of Nebraska*, 2d ed. (1965; rpt. Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1974).

3. See David B. Danbom, "North Dakota: The Most Midwestern State," in *Heartland: Comparative Histories of the Midwestern States*, ed. James H. Madison (Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 1988), pp. 107-26; Herbert T. Hoover, "South Dakota: An Expression of Regional Heritage," *ibid.*, pp. 186-205; Frederick C. Luebke, "Nebraska: Time, Place, and Culture," *Ibid.*, pp. 226-47.

4. Ronald M. Gephart, "Politicians, Soldiers and Strikes: The Reorganization of the Nebraska Militia and the Omaha Strike of 1882," *Nebraska History* 46 (June 1965): 89-120; Charles James Haug, "The Industrial Workers of the World in North Dakota, 1913-1917," *North Dakota Quarterly* 39 (Winter 1971): 85-102; "The Industrial Workers of the World in North Dakota, 1918-1925," *ibid.* 41 (Summer 1973): 5-19; David B. Wagaman, "The Industrial Workers of the World in Nebraska, 1914-1920," *Nebraska History* 56 (Fall 1975): 295-337; Jonathan F. Wagner, "'The Greatest Thing I Ever Did Was Join the Union': A History of the Dakota Teamsters During the Depression," *Great Plains Quarterly* 8 (Winter 1988): 16-28; Erling N. Sannes, "'There is Power in a Union': Organizing Fargo's Milk-Wagon Drivers in 1934," *North Dakota History* 54 (Spring 1987): 3-12; Erling N. Sannes, "Gas Sunday: Organizing Fargo, North Dakota, Teamsters in 1935," *Journal of the West* 35 (April 1996): 29-32; Erling N. Sannes, "'Union Makes Strength': Organizing Teamsters in South Dakota in the 1930s," *South Dakota History* 18 (Spring/Summer 1988): 36-66; Lynwood E. Oyos, "Labor's House Divided: The Morrell Strike of 1935-1937," *ibid.*: 67-88; William C. Pratt, "Workers, Bosses, and Public Officials: Omaha's 1948 Packinghouse Strike," *Nebraska History* 66 (Fall 1985): 294-313.

5. Russell Lowell Beebe, "History of Labor Organization and Legislation on Nebraska to 1918" (masters thesis, University of Nebraska, 1938); James Price Schroeder, "A History of Organized Labor in Fargo, North Dakota" (masters thesis,

University of North Dakota, 1939); Gilbert Alan Gray, "A History of the Labor Movement in South Dakota" (masters thesis, University of South Dakota, 1949); Patricia Lou Parsons, "Organized Labor in Nebraska During World War II" (masters thesis, University of Nebraska, 1950); Daniel J. Swinarski, "South Omaha and the Packing House Strike of 1904" (masters thesis, University of Iowa, 1987); Gail Lorna DiDonato, "Building the Meat Packing Industry in South Omaha, 1883-1898" (masters thesis, University of Nebraska at Omaha, 1989); Elmo Bryant Phillips, "A History of Street Railways in Nebraska" (Ph.D. diss., University of Nebraska, 1944); William D. Torrence, "A Case Study of Industrial Relations: The Lincoln Telephone and Telegraph Company and Communication Workers of America, Local 7470" (Ph.D. diss., University of Nebraska, 1962); Henry R. Martinson, *History of North Dakota Labor* (Fargo: self published, 1970); D. Jerome Tweton, *In Union There Is Strength: The North Dakota Labor Movement and the United Brotherhood of Carpenters and Joiners* (Grand Forks: North Dakota Carpenter/Craftsman Heritage Society, 1982); Bill Pratt, *Omaha in the Making of Nebraska Labor History* (Omaha: Ad Hoc Committee for the Study of Nebraska Labor History, 1981).

6. See Robert Kern, ed., *Labor in New Mexico: Unions, Strikes, and Social History since 1881* (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 1983); Robert Kern, "Organized Labor: Race, Radicalism, and Gender," in *Essays in 20th-Century New Mexico History*, ed. Judith Boyce DeMark (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 1994), pp. 149-67; Carlos Schwantes, "The History of Pacific Northwest Labor History," *Idaho Yesterdays* 28 (Winter 1985): 23-35.

7. One of the major developments in American historiography over the past generation has been the emergence of the "new labor history," an approach that often focuses its attention more on working class culture or the social history of working people than on unions. See Herbert G. Gutman, *Work, Culture and Society in Industrializing America: Essays in American Working-class and Social History* (New York: Vintage Books, 1977). For an overview of the "new labor history," see David Brody, "Workers and Work in America: The New Labor History," in *Ordinary People and Everyday Life: Perspectives on the New Social History*, ed. James B. Gardner and George Rollie Adams (Nashville: American Association for State and Local History, 1983), pp. 139-59.

8. Shelton Stromquist, *A Generation of Boomers: The Pattern of Railroad Labor Conflict in Nineteenth-Century America* (Urbana and Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 1987).

9. "According to an unpublished W.P.A. account, this episode was 'perhaps the first significant victory for organized labor in Omaha.'" Pratt, *Omaha in the Making* (note 5 above), p. 2. See also Robert V. Bruce, *1877: Year of Violence* (Chicago: Quadrangle Books, 1970), p. 266.

10. *Nebraska: A Guide to the Cornhusker State* (New York: Hastings House, 1947), pp. 214-16.

11. See Gutman, *Work, Culture and Society* (note 7 above).

12. Thomas Magnuson, "Two Railroad Towns React to a Strike: Havelock and Plattsmouth in 1922," *Nebraska History* 75 (Fall 1994): 254-60.

13. Erling N. Sannes, "Knowledge Is Power: The Knights of Labor in South Dakota," *South Dakota History* 22 (Winter 1992): 400-430; Erling N. Sannes, "'Agitate, Organize, Educate': The Knights of Labor in Northern Dakota, 1882-1892," paper read at the Missouri Valley History Conference, Omaha, Nebraska, 15 March 1991. "No other labor organization in South Dakota wielded as much power and influence until the coming of the Teamsters Union and the CIO in the 1930s." Sannes, "Knowledge is Power," p. 430. (Actually, the CIO never had much of a presence in South Dakota.)

14. Jonathan Ezra Garlock, "A Structural Analysis of the Knights of Labor: A Prolegomenon to the History of the Producing Classes" (Ph.D. diss., Rochester University, 1974), pp. 326-28, 361-62, 402.

15. Pratt, *Omaha in the Making* (note 5 above), pp. 3-4.

16. Sannes, "Knowledge Is Power" (note 13 above), pp. 417-18.

17. Leon Fink, *Workingmen's Democracy: The Knights of Labor and American Politics* (Urbana and Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 1985), pp. 112-48; Ralph Schranau, "Workers and Politics: The Knights of Labor in Dubuque, Iowa, 1885-1890" *The Annals of Iowa* 48 (Winter/Spring 1987): 353-77; "The Knights of Labor in Iowa," *ibid.* 50 (Spring 1991): 861-91.

18. For history of unionization efforts in the packing industry, see David Brody, *The Butcher Workmen: A Study of Unionization* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1964); for Omaha, see William C. Pratt, "Divided Workers, Divided Communities: The 1921-22 Packinghouse Strike in Omaha and Nebraska City," *Labor's Heritage* 5 (Winter 1994): 50-65; William C. Pratt, "Advancing Packinghouse Unionism in South Omaha, 1917-1920," *Journal of the West* 35 (April 1996): 42-49; Pratt, "Workers, Bosses, and Public Officials" (note 4 above). A recent dissertation on packinghouse workers devotes much of its attention to Omaha. See Wilson Jerome Warren, "The Limits of New Deal Social Democracy: Working-Class



Structural Pluralism in Midwestern Meatpacking, 1900-1955)" (Ph.D. diss., University of Pittsburgh, 1992), pp. 144-96, 362-424, and Wilson J. Warren, "The Impasse of Radicalism and Race: Omaha's Meatpacking Unionism, 1945-1955," *Journal of the West* 35 (April 1996): 50-54.

19. The Cudahy strike officially lasted almost a full year, ending in October of 1983, and Local 60 was decertified three months later. James Allen Flanery, "Strike Ends, But Cudahy Not Rehiring," *Omaha World-Herald* (evening), 20 October 1983; "Cudahy Vote Official: Union Is Decertified," 24 January 1984. Replacement workers had been hired during the strike, and they voted overwhelmingly against the union. BeefAmerica Operating Company had emerged as the Omaha area's largest meatpacker by the early 1990s, employing 900 workers at three locations. On 10 September 1993, it announced the closure of its local plants and that its Norfolk, Nebraska, facility would start a second shift. Two of BeefAmerica's Omaha plants, employing 300 workers, were unionized. Employees at the Norfolk packing operation also were represented by the UFCW. Robert Dorr and David Kotok, "Closing of BeefAmerica Plants Will Erase 900 Jobs in Omaha," *Omaha World-Herald* (morning), 11 September 1993.

20. *Sioux Falls Argus-Leader*, 15 December 1921; Oyos, "Labor's House Divided" (note 4 above), p. 69.

21. *South Dakota Union Farmer*, 22 January 1946.

22. Jim Rasmussen, "Packers Union OKs Contract For IBP Plant," *Omaha World-Herald* (morning), 29 July 1991; John Taylor, "Strike Fury Erupts Twice At Iowa Beef Plant Gates," 21 July 1982.

23. While the election itself was held in 1994, Monfort's appeal to the National Labor Relations Board was not resolved until 1996. "Board Clears the Way for Union At Monfort's Grand Island Plant," *Omaha World Herald* (morning) 17 April 1996; John Taylor, "Monfort Recognizes Union," *ibid.*, 23 July 1996; John Taylor, "Union Sets Sights On IBP," *ibid.*, 30 May 1996. For a study on Lexington prior to unionization efforts, see Lourdes Gouveia and Donald D. Stull, "Dances with Cows: Beefpacking's Impact on Garden City, Kansas, and Lexington, Nebraska," in Donald D. Stull, et al., *Any Way You Cut It: Meat Processing and Small-Town America* (Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 1995), pp. 85-107.

24. For a sample of recent scholarship on local packinghouse workers in Iowa, see Roger Horowitz, "It Wasn't a Time to Compromise: The Unionization of Sioux City's Packinghouses, 1937-1942," *The Annals of Iowa* 50 (Fall 1989/Winter 1990): 241-68; Bruce Fehn, "'The Only Hope We Had': United Packinghouse Workers Local 46 and the Struggle for Racial Equality in Waterloo, Iowa,

1948-1960," *ibid.* 54 (Summer 1995): 185-216; Wilson J. Warren, "When 'Ottumwa Went to the Dogs': The Erosion of Morrell-Ottumwa's Militant Union, 1954-1973," *ibid.*: 217-43; Mark A. Grey, "Turning the Pork Industry Upside Down: Storm Lake's Hygrade Work Force and the Impact of the 1981 Plant Closure," *ibid.*: 244-59.

25. W. C. Benfer, "The Story of the Homestake Lockout," *International Socialist Review* 10 (March 1910): 782-90; Joseph H. Cash, *Working the Homestake* (Ames: Iowa State University Press, 1973), pp. 80-99.

26. "A CIO union lost the fourth post-war bid Tuesday to organize the 1,300 non-union employees of the Homestake Gold Mine, but a union representative promised 'we'll be back.'" "Homestake Mine Workers Again Reject Union," *Huronite and Daily Plainsman* clipping, hand dated "March 9-1955," Box 13, Folder 6, Albert J. Maag Papers, University of South Dakota, Vermillion, South Dakota. Hereafter cited as Maag Papers. "Workers at the historic Homestake Mining Company went back to work today without a union after turning down a sixth attempt in 16 years to organize the miners." "Homestake Miners Say No To Union," clipping, hand dated "5-17-63," Box 14, Folder 8, Maag Papers. "Triumph of United Steelworkers Marks 7th Unionization Attempt," *Lead Daily Call*, 7 June 1966. The most detailed account of any labor dispute in the region involves a 1919 North Dakota coal strike. See Nancy Hesselstine Balazadeh, "The Process of Power and the Relative Autonomy of the State: Nonpartisan League in North Dakota, 1915-1922" (Ph.D. diss., Southern Illinois University at Carbondale, 1988), pp. 197-295. See also Thomas Shilts, "'To Prevent a Calamity Which Is Imminent': Governor Frazier and the Fuel Crisis of 1919," *North Dakota History* 63 (Winter 1996): 6-20.

27. William C. Pratt, "Socialism on the Northern Plains, 1900-1924," *South Dakota History* 18 (Spring/Summer 1988): 7, 11; "Using FBI Records in Writing Regional Labor History," *Labor History* 33 (Fall 1992): 482, note 35. Omaha was the site of the SP's national headquarters for part of 1903. Pratt, "Socialism on the Northern Plains," 7-9. In 1981, an individual showed me a copy of a two or three page statement that had been made to the Omaha police, outlining Communist activities among local packinghouse workers in the 1930s. This person was one of the two authors of the statement, which discussed episodes from their personal knowledge. My recollection is that the document was dated 1940 or 1941.

28. Robert L. Morlan, *Political Prairie Fire: The Nonpartisan League, 1915-1922* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1955). The labor

movement in Nebraska and South Dakota also supported the NPL. See *Official Proceedings of the First Annual Convention of the South Dakota State Federation of Labor* (Huron, 1920), 13, Box 15, Folder 12, Maag Papers.

29. Haug, "The Industrial Workers of the World, 1913-1917" (note 4 above), pp. 101-02.

30. Author's interviews with Clarence H. Sharp, Minneapolis, Minnesota.

31. Ibid. (for the information on the Dakotas).

32. Farm and unemployed or relief worker groups in this region sometimes joined forces in their protests. In 1933 local authorities in Roberts County, in northeast South Dakota, arrested a number of individuals for interfering with farm sales and sought to enjoin them and others from further efforts. Eleven of the people who filed affidavits in this episode were members of the Unemployed Council. William C. Pratt, "Rethinking the Farm Revolt of the 1930s," *Great Plains Quarterly* 8 (Summer 1988): 141, note 16. In Williams County, North Dakota, the Farmers Holiday and the Workers Alliance also joined forces on occasion. See "Alliance And Holiday In Joint Meet," *Williams County Farmers Press* (Williston), 3 December 1936. See also Erling N. Sannes, "'You can do anything you are big enough to do': Organizing Teamsters in North Dakota and Western Minnesota, 1936-38," paper read at the Northern Great Plains History Conference, Eveleth, Minnesota, 22 September 1988.

33. *Nebraska: A Guide* (note 10 above), p. 217.

34. For Communist farmers in the Dakotas, see William C. Pratt, "Farmers, Communists and the FBI in the Upper Midwest," *Agricultural History* 63 (Summer 1989): 61-80.

35. Sannes, "'There is Power in a Union'" (note 4 above); "'Union Makes Strength'" (note 4 above); "'You can do anything'" (note 32 above); "Gas Sunday" (note 4 above); Erling N. Sannes, "'Make Sioux City a Good Place to Live': Organizing Teamsters in Sioux City, 1933-1938," *The Annals of Iowa* 50 (Fall 1989/Winter 1990): 214-40. See also Jonathan F. Wagner, "'The Greatest Thing I Ever Did'" (note 4 above).

36. See Farrell Dobbs, *Teamster Power* (New York: Monad Press, 1973), pp. 198-232.

37. "Although membership increases and militant activity all but ceased during the war, the union expanded in the prosperous postwar years." Wagner, "'The Greatest Thing I Ever Did'" (note 4 above), p. 26.

38. William C. Pratt, "The Omaha Business Men's Association and the Open Shop, 1903-1909," *Nebraska History* 70 (Summer 1989): 172-83.

39. Pratt, *Omaha in the Making*, (note 5 above), pp. 14-20.

40. Schroeder, "A History of Organized Labor in Fargo" (note 5 above), pp. 109-14.

41. E. Merrick Dodd, "Some State Legislatures Go to War—On Labor Unions," *Iowa Law Review* 29 (January 1944): 148-74.

42. *South Dakota State Federation of Labor Legislative Report 1943* (Huron, 1943), Box 13, Folder 2, Maag Papers; Eugene C. Mahoney to Albert Maag, 30 June 1944, Box 2, Folder 6, Maag Papers; Francis McDonald to All Affiliates of the South Dakota Federation of Labor, 3 May 1945, Box 4, Folder 1, Maag Papers.

43. "Employers To organize Here," clipping; "Employers' Group Gains," clipping, hand dated "3-25-42"; "Associated Industries And Local Employers Charged With Violation Of National Labor Relations Act," clipping, Box 8, Folder 1, Maag Papers. "The Homestake Mining Co. controls the Political, Economic and Social Lives of all the people in western So. Dak. and controls the Republican Party of the state. So you can see what a helluva state I live in." Albert J. Maag to John Clark, 21 June 1962, Box 14, Folder 8, Maag Papers.

44. William C. Pratt, "Employer Offensive in Nebraska Politics, 1946-1949," in *Politics in the Postwar American West*, ed. Richard Lowitt (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1995), pp. 135-46, 334-40.

45. *South Dakota State Federation of Labor Legislative Report 1945* (Huron, 1945), Box 6, Folder 18, Maag Papers; *South Dakota Legislative Manual 1947* (Pierre: State Publishing Co., 1947), p. 327. For a more detailed treatment of anti-union efforts in South Dakota, see R. Alton Lee, "Reining in the 'Union Threat': Right-to-Work Laws in South Dakota," *South Dakota History* 26 (Summer/Fall 1996).

46. *Fargo Forum* (evening), 4 January 1947; 26 February 1947; 14 March 1947; 14 April 1947; *Fargo Forum* (morning), 1 July 1948. The right-to-work law carried 105,192 to 53,515. *Compilation of Election Returns National and State 1946-1954* (Bismarck, 1956). The *Fargo Forum*, which had backed both measures editorially, noted: "What the union leadership has succeeded in doing is to freeze the two laws against the possibility of ready amendment or repeal by some future legislature. Because the bills were referred to the people for a vote and were approved, they cannot be amended in the legislature except by a two thirds vote of each house." *Fargo Forum* (morning), 4 July 1948. For a survey of 1947 anti-union state legislation, see "States Lead in Legislation," *Business Week*, 14 June 1947, 90-96.

47. The conservative forces were not completely in control of the Nebraska Farmers Union in 1946.

That year the editor of the *Nebraska Union Farmer* wrote an editorial against the right-to-work amendment. In 1947, however, The Farmers Union testified in favor of anti-labor legislation. Pratt, "Employer Offensive" (note 44 above), pp. 141, 337, note 37.

48. See Keith Lumsden and Craig Petersen, "The Effect of Right-to-Work Laws on Unionization in the United States," *Journal of Political Economy* 83 (1975): 1237-48.

49. In Omaha's 1890 Labor Day parade a representative of the Knights of Labor, Plasters' and Tenders' Union, Local Assembly 729 carried a banner that read in part, "OF DIFFERENT COLOR BUT ONE MIND WE WILL WORK IN HARMONY FOR ALL TIME." "The colored barbers" also participated in the parade. *Omaha World-Herald* (evening), 1 September 1890.

50. Pratt, "Advancing Packinghouse Unionism," (note 18 above), pp. 45-46.

51. Author's interview with Vida Morrison, 23 May 1981, Omaha, Nebraska; Pratt, "Workers, Bosses, Public Officials" (note 4 above), p. 308.

52. A recent study on midwestern packinghouse workers emphasizes the reluctance of UPWA locals in Omaha to work on equal opportunity and civil rights issues in the late 1940s and 1950s, Warren, "The Limits of New Deal Social Democracy" (note 18 above), pp. 395-424. See also Warren, "The Impasse of Radicalism and Race" (note 18 above).

53. Pratt, "Divided Workers, Divided Communities" (note 18 above), pp. 57-58. On the other hand, at least according to the *Argus-Leader*, Sioux Falls women played a key role in dissuading Morrell workers from going out on strike. *Sioux Falls Argus-Leader*, 15 December 1921.

54. Morrison interview (note 51 above).

55. William C. Pratt, "'Union Maids' in Omaha Labor History, 1887-1945," in *Perspectives: Women in Nebraska History* (Lincoln: Nebraska Department of Education and Nebraska State Council for the Social Studies, 1984), pp. 205-06. The increased utilization of technology in the packing industry led to a serious reduction in jobs that women had historically held. This, in turn, resulted in problems over seniority rights between women and men. See Dennis A. Deslippe, "'We Had an Awful Time With Our Women': Iowa's United Packinghouse Workers of America, 1945-75," *Journal of Women's History* 5 (Spring 1993): 10-32; Bruce Fehn, "'Chickens Come Home to Roost': Industrial Reorganization, Seniority, and Gender Conflict in the United Packinghouse Workers of America, 1955-1966," *Labor History* 34 (Spring-Summer 1993): 324-41.

56. Dee Ralles, "Unions' Gavels in Women's Hands," *Omaha World-Herald* (Sunday), 30 July

1972. For a survey of Omaha women unionists, see Pratt, "Union Maids" (note 55 above). In this article, I have not discussed either the Communication Workers of America (AFL-CIO) or one of its predecessors, the Northwestern Union of Telephone Workers, both of which have been important unions for women in this region. See Thomas R. Brooks, *Communication Workers of America: The Story of a Union* (New York: Mason/Charter, 1977).

57. For Mexican and Mexican-American workers in Omaha and western Nebraska, see Nina L. Nixon, "Mexican-American Voluntary Associations in Omaha, Nebraska," *Journal of the West* 28 (July 1989): 73-85; Dennis Nodin Valdes, "Settlers, Sojourners, and Proletarians: Social Formation in the Great Plains Sugar Beet Industry, 1890-1940," *Great Plains Quarterly* 10 (Spring 1990): 110-23. The work force at IBP's packing plant in Lexington, Nebraska, is largely "Hispanic, coming from California, Mexico or Central America." Stephen Buttry, "Natives, Newcomers Adapt to County's Changing Face," *Omaha World-Herald* (Sunday), 30 May 1993. BeefAmerica's three Omaha area plants, which closed in late 1993, also had a high percentage of Hispanics in their workforce. *Omaha World Herald* (morning), 11 September 1993.

58. For Japanese railroad workers, see *Plains Folk: North Dakota's Ethnic History*, ed. William C. Sherman and Playford V. Thorson (Fargo: North Dakota Institute for Regional Studies, 1986), pp. 337-38. For Chinese workers in the Black Hills, see Daniel Liestman, "The Chinese in the Black Hills, 1876-1932," *Journal of the West* 27 (January 1988): 74-83. White miners drove the Chinese out of the mines in South Dakota, in some cases utilizing similar techniques to those used in other western communities. See Richard White, *It's Your Misfortune and None of My Own: A New History of the American West* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1991), pp. 340-42.

59. See James Allen Flanery, "Which Side Will Southeast Asians Take in IBP Dispute? No One Sure," *Omaha World-Herald* (Sunday), 21 December 1986. "One indication of what is at stake here is that IBP and Local 222 each had a Southeast Asian at the bargaining table before talks broke off Dec. 13. The company man is Vietnamese. The union man is Laotian." More than 500 of the 2800 workers at the Dakota City plant were Southeast Asians.

60. Tweton, *In Union There Is Strength* (note 5 above), pp. 79-82. "At the peak of construction, the ABM project employed over 1,200 carpenters—more than North Dakota could provide. So many outsiders crowded in that Grand Forks worried about a 'carpetbagger takeover.'" *ibid.*, p. 81. North

Dakota also benefitted from an oil boom in the 1950s and 1960s.

61. Union printers were particularly hard hit in the 1970s. Changing technology led to their ouster from newspaper jobs across the region. For example, the *Omaha World-Herald*, the largest paper on the northern Plains, eliminated its union in 1973. Typographical Union, Local 190 had been at the *World-Herald* since the paper was started in 1889. See Bill Pratt, "Notes From the Past," *Omaha Labor Chronicle*, 28 April 1993. A number of Omaha area unions are doing better in the 1990s than in the previous decade, however. See John Taylor, "Unions' Star Appears to Be in Decline," *Omaha World-Herald* (morning), 6 September 1982; John Taylor, "Craftsmen Enjoy Construction Boom," *ibid.*, 2 September 1996.

62. Kenneth A. Kovach, "State and Local Public Employee Labor Relations—Where Are They Headed?" *Journal of Collective Negotiations in the Public Sector* (1979): 19-29.

63. David George Wagaman, "Public Employee Impasse Resolution: A Historical Examination of the Nebraska Experience with Some Comparisons to the New York State Experience" (Ph.D. diss., University of Nebraska-Lincoln, 1977); David G. Wagaman, "The Evolution of Some Legal-Economic Aspects of Collective Bargaining by Public Employees in Nebraska Since 1919," *Nebraska History* 58 (Winter 1977): 475-89; Janet Stewart Arnold, "The Historical Development of Public Employee Collective Bargaining in Nebraska," *Creighton Law Review* 15 (1981-1982): 477-97.

64. Author's telephone interview with William Arfmann (Executive Director, NAPE), 27 July 1993; author's interview with John Russell, Omaha, Nebraska, 29 July 1993.

65. Author's telephone interview with Roger Larson (Director of Institutional Research for Higher Education, NSEA), 13 July 1993. Efforts to organize the faculty at the University of Nebraska-Lincoln, the largest campus of the state university system, have not been successful.

66. Author's telephone interview with Jerry Wilson (Director of Membership Services, South Dakota Education Association), 13 July 1993; author's telephone interview with Nancy Sands (UniServ Director, North Dakota Education Association), 23 July 1993. See also Dennis W. Finch, "The South Dakota Public Employees' Union Act: Is It Really Collective Bargaining?" *South Dakota Law Review* 24 (Spring 1979): 243-59. Bargaining for Nebraska state employees has been facilitated by a 1985 state Supreme Court decision, which established that state agencies must negotiate with certified bargaining agents on wages, and a 1987 law that provided a less onerous binding arbitration mechanism in the event of impasse than previ-

ously existed. See *State Code Agencies Education Association et al. v. Department of Public Institutions, State of Nebraska et al.*, 364 Northwest Reporter 2d 44; Peter L. J. Pashler, *Nebraska State Government and Collective Bargaining* (Consultant's Report Prepared for the State Legislature, 1986).

67. Author's telephone interview with staff person (North Dakota Public Employees Association-AFT), July 1993.

68. Author's telephone interview with Ken Melius (Executive Director, South Dakota State Employees Organization), 22 July 1993. The conclusion that AFSCME may organize other state employees is mine, not Melius's.

69. Long before the 1970s, there were attempts to organize college faculty in the region. As early as 1917, some professors formed an AFT local at the North Dakota Agricultural College in Fargo. It lasted a few years and then was reactivated from 1932 to 1937. Schroeder, "A History of Organized Labor in Fargo" (note 5 above), pp. 46-49. An AFT local was established for a brief period at Northern State Teachers College in Aberdeen. Irvin R. Kuenzili to Albert J. Maag, 21 March 1951, Box 10, Folder 6, Maag Papers. In the 1970s, there were AFT locals at the University of Nebraska at Omaha and the University of Nebraska-Lincoln as well. The AFT also organized public school teachers in the region. For example, it had locals in Fargo in 1919-20 and again in 1938; Huron and Sioux Falls in the 1940s and 1960s respectively; and Omaha, Lincoln, and Grand Island in the World War II era. J. J. Guenter, an Omaha AFT leader, served as president of the Omaha Central Labor Union and then the Nebraska Federation of Labor in the 1940s. Schroeder, "A History of Organized Labor in Fargo" (note 5 above), pp. 8-10; *South Dakota State Federation of Labor Proceedings* 1947 (Huron, 1947), p. 74, Box 17; "Union Official Will Talk Here," clipping, hand dated "2-7-69," Box 15, Sioux Falls Folder, Maag Papers; *The Unionist* (Omaha), 23 April 1943; 3 September 1943; 15 September 1944; 14 September 1945.

70. See Daniel J. Elazar, "Political Culture on the Plains," *Western Historical Quarterly* 11 (July 1980): 267. A labor-management approach offers a somewhat different perspective on one of Nebraska's unique institutions: its public power districts. Frederick C. Luebke notes: "it is the only state in the Union with public ownership of its entire capacity to produce electricity commercially." Luebke, "Nebraska" (note 3 above), p. 240. He and others have sought to explain the apparent anomaly of "a state-wide public power system" in conservative Nebraska. See Olson, *History of Nebraska* (note 2 above), pp. 315-20. One aspect of this development never seems to be mentioned, however. Prior to the public takeover, a number of

the power plants had been unionized, but the public power districts refused to bargain with their employees, maintaining that they were not required to do so. In 1947, a regional representative of the International Brotherhood of Electrical Workers (AFL) testified: "‘Since 1941 the publicly owned utilities in Nebraska have had the worst labor relations above the Mason-Dixon line.’ Referring to the large privately owned power companies that have been taken over by public power districts, Garrity pointed out that under private management employes had collective bargaining rights." *Nebraska State Journal* (Lincoln), 22 March 1947. He was testifying on behalf of a bill that would have provided collective bargaining rights for public power district employees. It did not pass that year. But another measure, designed to avoid strikes on public utilities, was enacted in 1947. It established a Court of Industrial Relations, which later became the basis for public sector bargaining in Nebraska. See Pratt, "Employer Offensive" (note 44 above), pp. 141-42, 146; sources cited in note 67. In South Dakota, the state AFL opposed the creation of public power districts because of its concern that unionized workers would lose their bargaining rights. This position caused the State Federation some problems with the Farmers Union, which was one of the strong public power supporters in South Dakota, and some of its affiliates as well. See Albert J. Maag to Francis McDonald, 1 March 1949, Box 6, Folder 18, Maag Papers; *South*

*Dakota State Federation of Labor Proceedings of Twenty-Seventh Annual Convention* (1949), pp. 54-59, Box 17, Maag Papers.

71. The explanation for Nebraska's exceptionalism on this topic is beyond the scope of this essay, but the following factors should be taken into account: The Nebraska Unicameral legislature, which reduces the number of players and hence obstacles to some innovations; the relative strength of the state's labor movement compared to that in the Dakotas; the makeup of the legislative leadership in the late 1960s, particularly the role played by Terry Carpenter, then an influential legislator from Scottsbluff; and the state Supreme Court.

72. Lloyd B. Omdahl suggests that organized labor's political clout in North Dakota dates to the 1959 formation of the Committee on Political Education (COPE) and that it "came through with heavy increases in the labor precincts" during the 1960 special election that sent Democrat Quentin Burdick to the U.S. Senate. Lloyd B. Omdahl, *Insurgents* (Brainerd, Minnesota: Lakeland Color Press, 1961), p. 205. Labor's role in the rejection of the proposed constitution was clearly recognized by observers: "The fight against adoption of the constitution was led by organized labor, which had unsuccessfully sought to remove a so-called right-to-work provision from the document." Jim Wilson, "Revised Constitution Shattered." *Bismarck Tribune*, 29 April 1972.

73. Luebke, "Nebraska" (note 3 above), p. 228.